However, the situation will probably get worse because of revised government curriculum guidelines to be introduced this April. The new guidelines continue the more lax education policy, which started in 1977 as a reaction to the cramming-centered system that was believed to be stifling students' creativity, so many fundamental skills were removed from textbooks, while 70 study hours, nearly 7% of the annual total, were slashed from public elementary and junior high school curricula.

In addition, the introduction of a five-day school week for public schools, starting next month, has resulted in a compression of the entire curriculum by 30%, omission of basic skills practice and postponement of difficult concepts to later years.

Ongoing revision

The government has revised its curriculum guidelines for the compulsory first through ninth grades, every 10 years or so since 1958. Until the mid-1970s, the guidelines were adjusted to enrich the content of education. But in the late 1970s, there was growing public consensus that too much emphasis on passing exams was harmful to children's development and causing stress as a result of the brutal competition for university entrance examinations. Therefore, so-called "pressure-free" education gained favor and the government started simplifying the content of textbooks to allow students the freedom to develop their individuality.

"The most important thing is to encourage students to think for themselves, not to cram facts into their heads just to get better scores. To motivate them to study, we consider a fertile sensibility and a healthy body to be crucial," said Yuzuru Imasato, head of curriculum planning at the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.

Imasato explained that the major cuts in the textbooks will help students who

A survey by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) in 1999 indicated that the academic ability of Japanese schoolchildren had edged down. In the IEA's international survey of eighth graders in 1995, Japan marked the third-highest average score (605 points) in math, behind Singapore (643) and South Korea (607). But in the latest survey, in 1999, Japan's ranking fell to fifth position at 579 points, following Singapore (604), South Korea (587), Taiwan (585) and Hong Kong (582). The scores are calculated based on the standard deviation from the international average, which is set at 500. Likewise, Japan's science ability ranking fell to fourth with 550 points in 1999, down from third with 571 points in 1995.

Even Japan's top university professors are strongly criticizing the government curriculum guidelines as "bureaucratic and harmful."

"The pressure-free education system is nothing more than bureaucratic talk. The contradictory educational policy has harmed many schoolchildren's future and possibility, by taking away their opportunities and eagerness to learn," said Hirofumi Uzawa, professor emeritus in economics at the University of Tokyo. Uzawa believes the recent drop in the math ability of schoolchildren reflects an educational policy that results in math textbooks that are "less attractive" for many students by merely showing formulas.

Similarly, Kazuo Nishimura, professor of economics at Kyoto University, sighs over the severe deterioration of math ability among economics majors, especially those who did not take math classes at high school because most top-class private universities do not include mathematics in their entrance examinations.

"Among those economics majors at top university who didn't take math courses at high school and didn't take a math test

the difficulty of questions, math textbooks for Japanese schoolchildren are two to three years behind the ones used in China, South Korea and Singapore. As long as the government keeps the current pressure-free education system,